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Narratives and the Constitution of a Common Identity

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Published in:
Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power

DOI:
[10.1080/10702890802201685](https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890802201685)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2008

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Kuroiwa, Y., & Verkuyten, M. (2008). Narratives and the Constitution of a Common Identity: The Karen in Burma. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 15(4), 391.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890802201685>

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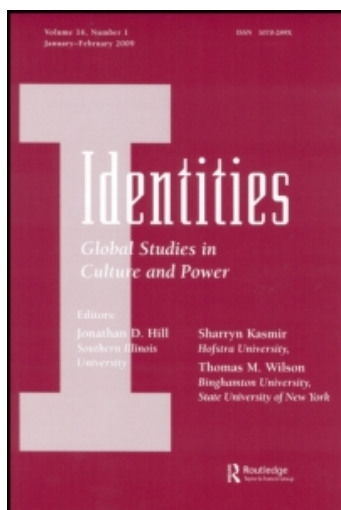
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Publisher Routledge

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Identities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713663307>

NARRATIVES AND THE CONSTITUTION OF A COMMON IDENTITY: THE KAREN IN BURMA

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To cite this Article Kuroiwa, Yoko and Verkuyten, Maykel 'NARRATIVES AND THE CONSTITUTION OF A COMMON IDENTITY: THE KAREN IN BURMA', *Identities*, 15: 4, 391 – 412

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10702890802201685

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10702890802201685>

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Narratives and the Constitution of a Common Identity: The Karen in Burma

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This research was conducted in an informal school located in Thailand at the border with Myanmar (Burma) and supervised by the Karen National Union (KNU). The KNU has claimed and fought for political autonomy and independence from the Burmese government for more than a half century. The authors examine how, in their narratives about what it means to be Karen, future Karen leaders try to deal with challenges to a sense of Karen unity and “groupness,” and to the legitimacy of the Karen struggle. One important challenge is the substantial cultural, religious, linguistic, and geographical internal diversity. Establishing a coherent Karen identity among the different subgroups is a continuing struggle for Karen leaders. Another is the negative labeling of the KNU as stubborn people and violent terrorists. These labels endanger the political project, the international reputation, and the local attractiveness of the KNU.

Key Words: Karen, Myanmar, Burma, narratives, identity

Theoretical literature has emphasized the critical role of political organizations and group identities in understanding the causes and nature of ethno-national conflicts. The core argument is that scholars should not take social groups for granted, but rather should examine the ways in which organizations actually construct a sense of groupness (Berbier 1998; Stein 2001; Swart 1995; Zuo and Benford 1995). Among other things, this implies an analysis of how ethno-political movement activists define and narrate group understandings, for example, to mobilize people, to create a sense of loyalty among potential adherents, or to justify their claim for self-determination. Group understandings are analyzed as the changing result of continuous “group-making projects” (Brubaker 2004; della Porta and Diani 1999; Reicher and Hopkins 2001), which implies an analysis of “the role of

activists, organizations, and political discourses in bringing about ethnic groups" (Vermeersch 2003: 880).

The present study focuses on the ethno-national group understanding within a political organization involved in one of the longest "civil wars" in the world. The focus is on the struggle of the Karen in Burma (Myanmar), and particularly on the Karen National Union (KNU), which has ceaselessly demanded political autonomy from the Burmese government since 1949. Focusing on the group understandings of Karen ethno-political activists is especially interesting because Karen organizations face a serious challenge when it comes to unification and unity. Because of the long duration of the struggle against the Burmese government, the term "Karen" is commonly used in the media and in academic journals and is also adopted in domestic as well as international institutions. However, the term is problematic in the sense that it describes people with mutually unintelligible languages of diverse cultural subgroups (e.g., Sgaw, Pwo, and Pao), of different religions (e.g., Baptists, Buddhists, and animists), and from various geographical locations ranging from the central Delta area of Burma to the eastern periphery along the border with Thailand (see Burma Ethnic Research Group 1998; Cheesman 2002; Falla 1991; Harridan 2002). Establishing a coherent Karen identity and a sense of commitment among the different subgroups is a continuing challenge for Karen leaders and organizations going back to the 1880s. Since its start in 1948, the KNU faced problems of internal diversity, and the KNU elite has tried continuously to promote a unified image and a singular pan-Karen identity. The Karen nationalist movement's history is "as much the result of intra-ethnic conflict as conflict between Karens and non-Karens" (Harridan 2002: 86).

In our study we did not focus on current political leaders or (semi-)official documents, but rather on future Karen leaders or students of the "Karen Youth Leadership Management Training Center," which is an activity of the Karen Youth Organization. Our aim is to examine how these students themselves define Karen identity by focusing on the ways that they articulate a coherent and unifying Karen identity. Hence, our analytical interest is in identifying and analyzing their narratives and how they function in explaining Karen identity.

The perspective adopted is one in which identities become manifest in narrative. Various theorists have argued that the predominant way in which self- and group-understandings are given shape is through narrative (Holland et al. 1998; Somers 1994). Acts of framing and narrative encoding are key issues in determining how qualities, characteristics, events, and circumstances are interpreted, presented,

and acted upon (Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Vermeersch 2003; Olzak 2004; Roy 1994). National and ethnic narratives provide accounts of the group's origin, its history, and its relationship to others (Mehan and Robert 2001; Reicher and Hopkins 2001).

Framing and narrative encoding always take place within a rhetorical context, where there are always competing stories and interpretations possible. The emphasis on rhetoric draws attention to the fact that constructions are fabricated against alternatives: The choice of a narrative or interpretation is part of an argument to be defended—actually or potentially—against alternatives (Billig 1995). A particular interpretation implies justifying one's position and criticizing the counter-position. Conflicts and violence regularly involve rhetorical struggles to label, interpret, and explain. An obvious example is that the same violent act can be defined as an act of terrorism by one group but as an act of liberation by another. The "battle" over stories and interpretations is what Horowitz (1991:2) calls "meta-conflicts," conflicts over the nature of the conflict (Brass 1997). The idea of meta-conflict is very relevant in the case of the KNU because their struggle has been to deal with historical and political interpretations that tend to de-legitimize the Karen's political claims. Thus, in examining how Karen students define Karen identity, we will investigate how they themselves orient to or deal with counter-narratives. To contextualize the research, a short historical description will be presented first (see Harridan 2002; Renard 2003; Smith 1991, 1994), followed by a description of the research site.

The history of the Karen and the KNU

From illiterate hill tribes to ethno-political activists

The Karen live in Thailand and Burma, but the idea of a pan-Karen identity is a product of political and historical conditions in Burma (Cheesman 2002). Numbers are controversial: Governmental censuses have variously estimated the number of Karen living in present-day Burma at between 2 million and 5 million, whereas Karen nationalists claim that there are more than 7 million Karen (Renard 2003). In addition, in Thailand there are over 400,000 Karen (see Keyes 2003). The Karen have lived in Burma for many centuries and claim they are among the earliest settlers. The more recent development of a Karen identity goes back to the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in the early nineteenth century (Christie 1998; Marshall 1922; San C. Po. 1928; Smeaton 1887). The missionaries provided Karen farmers with a new religion and also with a sense of "peoplehood" by introducing,

for example, a Karen writing script; by establishing schools and hostels; by publishing Karen language books, periodicals, and newspapers; and, importantly, by founding a supra-local network of connections and organizations of Karen churches and by educating a Karen elite (Christie 1998; Jones 1961; Keyes 1977).

In 1881 the Karen National Association (KNA) was established in the city of Toungoo in Burma (Rajah 2002). The aims of the KNA were “to promote Karen identity, leadership, education and writing and to bring about the social and economic advancement of the Karen people” (Smith 1991: 45). It was the first institutionalized form of Karen ethno-nationalism that attempted to overcome the internal differences in language, culture, religion, and locality. However, even though membership was open to all Karen regardless of their background, the organization was dominated by Sgaw Baptists and received less support from the majority Karen Buddhists (Rajah 2002).

The administrative reform planned by the British colonizers in the late nineteenth century transformed the KNA into a fully-fledged ethno-political organization. For the first time, KNA leaders began to consider the political interests of the Karen community as differing from those of the majority Burmese. In 1920 Sidney Lo Nee, a spokesperson for the KNA, argued that “being the second largest indigenous race in Burma, the identity and interests of the Karen should be protected by separate electorates” (Smith 1991: 51). Then, in 1928 Dr San C. Po, known as the father of the Karen nation, issued the first call for an independent Karen state (Smith 1991: 44–51). Po’s nationalist aspirations still affect Karen ethno-politics, and his ideal of self-determination remains a basic KNU demand. A Buddhist wing of the KNA (BKNA) was formed in 1939 because some Buddhists did not feel adequately represented by the KNA.

Many Karen served the British colonial government and, later, fought alongside the British troops in the Second World War. Their loyalty to Britain further increased the sense of difference and rivalry between the Burmese and the Karen. The Karen were pro-British and expected British help and support in gaining independence after the war. Many Burmese, however, saw the Karen as colonial collaborators, and when the British troops fled to India in 1942, the Japanese army and the Burma Independence Army massacred many Karen people.

Soon after Burma gained its independence from the British in 1948, four Karen organizations, including the KNA, the BKNA, the Karen Central Organization (KCO), and the Karen Youth Organization, united and formed the Karen National Union (KNU). This was an attempt to forge a common and unified Karen identity and to establish a strong ethno-national organization that demanded political influence,

equality, and the creation of a separate Karen state. However, KNU's demand for a separate state resulted in a political impasse, at least partly because of the relatively large territory that was claimed and the geographical intermixing of Karen and Burmese people, making a territorial division difficult. In addition, a number of Karen groups did put forward contradictory claims and were in favor of a policy of cooperation with the Burmese government. This internal diversity made it increasingly difficult for the KNU leadership to further its cause and to appeal to the British for support.

In June 1949 the KNU declared the formation of the Karen Free State of "Kawthoolei" ("a land of flowers"). This was the start of the so-called Karen revolution that continues today, making it one of the longest violent conflicts in the world. Kawthoolei provided the Karen with a sense of common place, culture, and identity. In the late 1950s, however, there was a crisis among KNU leadership resulting in a split along political, religious, and ethnocultural lines. Unity and direction were found again under the charismatic leadership of Bo Mya, who succeeded in generating a more coherent sense of identity among diverse Karen groups and in making the KNU the dominant force in the Karen nationalist movement. However, factionalism kept emerging between different groups, hampering the KNU's political vision and leaving many Karen dissatisfied. The KNU claimed to represent all Karen but continued to be dominated by a small group of Sgaw Christians, particularly Bo Mya with his strict Christian morals. The older KNU leadership also had difficulties in appeasing the new generation of educated Karen youth and convincing them of KNU's defensive military strategy.

The last decades have witnessed the loss of considerable parts of claimed KNU territory to the Burmese military government. In the 1980s and the 1990s the government began large-scale offensives on Karen strongholds. In January 1995 Manerplaw, the former headquarters of the KNU near the Thai border, fell into Burmese hands. This was primarily due to the actions of a group of former soldiers and officials of the armed wing of the KNU, the Karen National Liberation Army. This group aligned with the Burmese government and established the "Democratic Karen Buddhist Army" (DKBA). The DKBA claimed they were fighting against anti-Buddhist sentiments and discrimination inside the KNU and its predominantly Christian higher command. The KNU claimed, however, that the DKBA's alignment with the government was for self-interested reasons, namely, in exchange for territory inside Burma. Thus, the fall of Manerplaw was not only the result of conflicts between the Karen and the Burmese government but also of the continuing failure of the KNU to represent all Karen groups.

As the KNU was pushed back by the Burmese military, many Karen fled to Thailand as refugees. The first group of 10,000 Karen refugees arrived in Thailand as early as 1984, and in 1998 it was estimated that approximately 120,000 Karen were living in seven different refugee camps on the Thai side of the border with Burma (Burma Ethnic Research Group 1998). Rajah (2002) observed that KNU members who previously held high positions in the civil administration of the Kawthoolei government were dispersed throughout many of these refugee camps. These refugees have established different social and political organizations that have various meetings (Rajah 2002). The KNU organized, for example, a series of seminars (in 2000 and 2002) in which Karen leaders discussed the political situation and the continuous question of Karen identity and unity. The KNU is "still struggling to convince the Karen 'family' that their construction of Karen identity is the only one to which all Karens should give assent" (Harrihan 2002: 132). Furthermore, Karen groups state that they are worried that "young people are being swallowed into Thai society and are losing a sense of pride in their culture and identity" (quoted in Cheesman 2002: 208).

The research site

Among the refugee organizations is the Karen Youth Organization (KYO), a youth branch of KNU that has established its headquarters illegally in Thailand. One of the main activities of the KYO is to govern the illegal and informal school called the "Karen Youth Leadership Management Training Center" (KYLMTTC). The school is a two-story wooden building surrounded by rice fields and cow farmers, and it is here that we conducted our fieldwork.

The KYLMTTC was first launched in 2002 with the aim of producing leaders of the future Karen community. The original founder of KYLMTTC was John William, a Karen who as a political refugee received Australian citizenship and whose personal connections with Catholic organizations in Australia provided the necessary funds for the school. The school compound is located illegally in a small Thai village along the border with Burma. During the nine-month program, the students learn English, computer skills, Karen history, leadership and management, and social studies. The most influential teacher, however, is the history teacher, and history is considered the most important subject. The official language in the school is either Burmese or Karen. Around fifty students have graduated in the last two years; most of them currently serve various Karen political and social organizations in Thailand as well as inside Burma.

Our research focused on all thirty students of the academic year of 2004–2005 and was carried out from June to October 2004. The students were between sixteen and twenty-seven years of age and came from various economic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. There were seventeen male and thirteen female students. Twenty students described themselves as Baptists, seven as Catholic, and three as Buddhist. In addition, twenty-one students were Sgaw Karen and nine students were Pwo Karen. All of the students had completed at least ten years of compulsory education, either inside Burma or in the refugee camps.

According to the leader of the Karen Youth Organization (KYLMTTC Report of 2003–2004: 2), the aims of the KYLMTTC program are (1) to provide educational opportunities for Karen youth; (2) to unify Karen youth of different backgrounds and coming from different regions such as the conflict zone, the refugee camps, and central parts of Burma; and (3) to educate future Karen leaders so that they can work for the Karen community and succeed the former generation of Karen nationalists. In short, KYLMTTC tries to unify and mobilize Karen youth of diverse backgrounds for the political project of the KNU, involving the promotion of a singular pan-Karen identity. This intention was communicated explicitly to the students. At the opening ceremony of the school in June 2004, the secretary of the KNU gave a short speech to the students and stated,

We need good leaders, and we should not be lazy. Without our own country, we have to live separately and illegally, so we should take this opportunity to become united. We have to understand the situation of Karen people inside Burma. We should build a bridge among Delta Karen, Bangkok Karen, and Border Karen.

The school prohibits foreigners to stay on its compound where most students reside illegally. However, because of the first author's acquaintance with the school administrators, it was possible to stay at the school as a volunteer social studies teacher. It was explained to the students that in addition to being a teacher, the first author was also affiliated with a Dutch university and was doing research on Karen identity. It was made clear that an independent study was being conducted and that there were no official links to the KNU or to the Burmese government. The first author spent as much time as possible with the students by engaging in numerous daily activities, such as cooking and eating, washing, and playing soccer. All contacts and interactions were confined to the school because as illegal residents in Thailand the students could not leave the campus without risking deportation back to Burma.

A range of materials was collected from participant-observations, informal interviews, monthly open-ended essays written by the students on "one's feelings about being Karen," and focus group discussions on "being Karen." The discussions and interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for basic content. For the analysis for the present article, a data file was built up of all the stories that related to the students' feelings of "being Karen" that were generated in the focus group discussions, interviews, and essays. These were then analyzed in terms of the variety of ways in which the students interpreted and argued about the topic of "being Karen." We have included data excerpts to illustrate the ways in which Karen identity was interpreted and how the students oriented to and managed alternative group-threatening interpretations. The names used in the excerpts are pseudonyms. In the essays and interviews, we asked the students to express their feelings of what it means for them to be Karen. Various feelings were described, but almost all students talked about pride. A sense of pride was, by far, the most frequently mentioned. Indeed, throughout the whole fieldwork period we did not come across one single instance in which a student doubted his or her pride in being Karen. The uniform and ardent expressions of pride in being Karen indicate a high degree of group identification. Pride is typical of identification, because this emotional reaction is only self-related (Rosenberg 1979). Thus, by emphasizing pride, the students positioned themselves as strong group identifiers committed to the Karen. The following sections examine how the students accounted for their pride and strong Karen identification and the ways that these accounts deal with alternative interpretations that challenge Karen identity.

Karen as an ethno-national group

Ethno-national distinctiveness

The Burma government emphasizes a sense of togetherness among all ethnic groups in the country, endorses a myth of common descent of all "races," promotes a unified national culture, and draws the administrative power to the center (Cheesman 2002).

Most students explicitly expressed worry about (what they saw as) the denial of ethnic diversity in Burma and fear of the government's "Burmanization" policy. Different students offered anecdotes about Burmese people who denied ethnic diversity in Burma. For example, according to one of the students, a Burmese teacher in her high school taught that Burma is an ethnically homogeneous country in which

there are no distinctive ethnic minority groups. Other students argued that the Burmese government continuously stresses the assumed homogeneity of the country so that the demands of ethnic minority groups can be ignored or suppressed. This makes it all the more important for these groups to present themselves as “real” ethnic groups with their own history and culture. Indeed, a major explanation that the students gave for their feelings of pride was the idea of the Karen being a separate ethnic group. The students made numerous references to and told many primordial stories related to culture, kinship, and history.

The next two excerpts are taken from two student essays and are concerned with the Karen possessing their own culture. There are many more statements like this and almost all students made similar claims.

Excerpt 1

I feel proud to be a Karen, because we have a culture. If we go to another country and wear our traditional Karen clothes, people would notice that we are Karen. They will know that we are an ethnic group. That is why I feel proud (Say War, male, Baptist, Sgaw).

Excerpt 2

We are wearing traditional clothes when guests come and meet us, so they can notice that oh! ‘This is a Karen’. So I am proud of being Karen. Our leaders are wearing Karen traditional clothes wherever they go. So people look at them and they know that that is the Karen ethnic group, and so I am proud of this for this reason (Say Say, female, Baptist, Sgaw).

In both excerpts, the feeling of pride is explicitly linked to having a traditional, distinct culture. It is because “we” as a group have a culture and therefore are an ethnic group that Say War claims to feel proud to be Karen. By stressing the possession of a separate culture and referring to artifacts—traditional clothes—that make this culture visible to others, Say War clearly defines the Karen as an identifiable ethnic group. The reference to these artifacts and the recognition by outsiders helps to make the claim both objective and factual. It is not only the Karen themselves who claim to be a separate group: This separation can be readily recognized by others living in another country or visiting as guests. In the above two excerpts, culture is presented in terms of heritage or tradition. It is the rich and valuable past that should be preserved and reaffirmed. This interpretation gives a historical grounding and continuity to the Karen. The students also made many explicit references to history. The next excerpt is an example.

Excerpt 3

We Karen migrated from Mongolia. We were the first settlers in Burma. Later, Burmese and Mon came to Burma. These latecomers stole our lands and have oppressed us ever since (Htoo Nay, male, Baptist, Sgaw).

This migration narrative was taught by the history teacher and was told by almost all students. This narrative is important because it further supports the claim of being a separate ethnic group and helps to define what it means to be Karen. The historical narrative provides a basis for a pan-Karen identity by emphasizing the common origin and by clearly distinguishing the Karen from other groups, such as the Burmese or the Mon. The narrative is meaningful in relation to “internal” differences and to these “others.” Htoo Nay defines the Karen as the first indigenous group in Burma, whereas the other groups came later and stole the land. Hence, it is the Karen who are presented as the original and rightful owners of the land and the others as the aggressors. The school’s head administrator, Hei Wah, told us that “if they do not know that the Karen came to Burma separately from the Burmese, they will be assimilated to Burmese society.”

In excerpts 4 and 5, references are made to the idea of nation and nationals. All students’ interpretations referred to the Karen as a nation. The designation of being a distinctive ethnic or cultural group does not in itself justify a struggle for self-determination and an independent state. In most countries around the world, various ethnic groups coexist more or less peacefully within the same territory (Horowitz 2000). Even if ethnic, cultural, or racial minorities feel marginalized by the majority, it is not a given that they demand self-determination or independence; they may, rather, opt to fight for equal rights within the same territory. Hence, to justify the struggle for self-determination and independence, it is important for the Karen to position themselves not only as an ethnic group but also as a national one. The following excerpts illustrate the way the students defined the Karen as a nation.

Excerpt 4

When I was in Burma, I felt that my feeling of being Karen was blocked. I knew myself as a Karen only in terms of our cloth, language, primitiveness and our subordination to the Burmese majority. But, since I came here, I got to know the history of Karen struggle, the existence of our own land, own flag, own leader, and own national anthem. I did not know that we have our own national holidays like Liberation Day, Revolution Day, and Martyr Day. We have everything just like the other countries. Now, my feeling of being Karen is complete. I feel very proud of being Karen (Dah Her, male, Catholic, Sgaw).

Excerpt 5

I feel proud of being a Karen, because we have our own government—Karen National Union. KNU has its own army, so we can fight against the Burmese government on our own. Because of KNU, Karen people inside Burma feel safe and protected. Without KNU, there is no freedom for Karen or the other ethnic minorities who rely on us. Because KNU liberates a certain territory in Burma, we can produce our cultural artifacts, such as CDs and clothes, without government censorship. We can also disseminate the information to the outside world (Say Poe, male, Catholic, Pwo).

In defining the Karen as a national group, Dah Her and Say Poe draw on two closely related aspects of the national imagination (Billig 1995). The first one refers to the modern symbols of nationhood, such as a flag, a national anthem, and national holidays. The second pertains to the modern instruments of nationhood, such as a government, an army, and a territory. Each country has these symbols and instruments that express the uniqueness of the national group. In addition, however, these symbols and instruments also follow a general, conventional pattern showing that “we have everything just like the other countries.” Thus, the Karen are presented as unique and universal at the same time, a unique nation in a world of nations. It depicts “us” as a nation that is part of a moral world order and is entitled to its freedom and independence like other nations around the world. As a result, they can align their political claim to the universal principle of national self-determination and try to make appeals to the international community.

Group unity

The historical narrative and the interpretation of being a cultural and historically unique ethnic group are not only meaningful in relation to outsiders but also in relation to linguistic, religious, and regional differences within the Karen. Most students expressed concern about Karen unity and emphasized the importance of uniting Karen people. Given that the majority of the students belong to the Sgaw Karen, whose language is the official language among Karen insurgents, it would not be surprising for Pwo Karen students to feel excluded from the Karen group and struggle. In fact, during our fieldwork, one of these students gave a public speech about his sense of isolation in the school in which, according to him, little consideration was given to non-Sgaw students.

To define and maintain a sense of unity, the narrative the students emphasized was a historical one of migration and common origin, that

is, one that offers a shared understanding and the possibility of a meaningful commonality. The following two excerpts illustrate how the interpretation of having a common origin can influence how intra-group differences are viewed.

Excerpt 6

Since coming from Mongolia, we have become divided into four sub-groups—Pwo, Sgaw, Pah, Bwe. We shared a common oral language. Then, British missionaries came to Burma and created our own literacy. In my mind and heart, East Pwo, West Pwo, Skaw Karen, Karenni and Bwe Karen are very beautiful and pure as white and bright pearls. I think that we belong to the same nationality and one family, so we have to love and understand each other. I love all the different types of Karen as one family (Eh Htoo, female, Baptist, Sgaw).

Excerpt 7

Before coming to this school, I had a negative view against the other sub-groups like Pwo and Bwe. But, here, the history teacher taught us that the Karen are composed of different sub-groups and Pwo and Bwe are actually members of the Karen family. Now, I no longer have any negative view against them. I love all of my nationals (Soe Du, male, Buddhist, Sgaw).

Eh Htoo and Soe Du both refer to the common history and origin and use the well-known “family” metaphor. By doing so, they “ethnicize” the group—ethnicity as “family-writ-large” (Horowitz 2000). One day we asked these two students who speak different languages how they managed to see each other as ethnic co-members. They immediately replied, “We share the same blood!” Moreover, when asking the students to write about the most important thing that they had learned from the history teacher, Eh Htoo drew the genealogical branch of the Karen. Hence, the metaphor of family and blood tie was used to define a primordial ethnic group membership. The family metaphor is also interesting because it carries a normative aspect: It gives the students a sense of obligation to “love each other.” Soe Du’s (Excerpt 7) words clearly illustrate this normative aspect, as she claims to have changed her view toward the other sub-group members by seeing the Karen as a “family” group.

Hence, the narrative about family and blood tie is meaningful in relation to the political and social mobilization of people of diverse backgrounds. In the past, the notion of “family” ties has also been stressed by KNU leaders in trying to reach various Karen groups (Harridan 2002). To unite and mobilize an internally diverse group, it is imperative to emphasize the common migratory history and

“imagined” essential bond. In that way a pan-Karen identity is defined that includes all sub-groups.

Karen as freedom fighters

Indigenusness and moral character

The Burmese government defines the Karens’ demand for independence as “a rebellious attempt to separate from our lands.” The international media and international institutions also tend to define the struggle of the Karen as a separatist movement. The rhetoric of “secession and separatists” implies negative characteristics, such as being violent insurgents and terrorists that threaten the stability of Burma. The Karen struggle is often labeled by the government and other outsiders as terrorism. On the Burmese government’s website (www.myanmar.com 2005), the activities of the KNU are described as “various terrorist attacks on civilians.” Furthermore, the Terrorism Knowledge Base lists the KNU as one of the terrorist organizations in the world. Negative labels like these can strongly and negatively affect the international reputation and the local attractiveness of an ethno-political organization (Vermeersch 2003).

The interpretation of terrorism is known to the Karen and the students. Say Htoo, the headmistress of the school, told us, “when I was inside Burma, I personally thought that KNU was a terrorist organization, because the public media picture them as a group of violent criminals.” Moreover, during our fieldwork, the students clearly expressed their concern about this negative labeling of the Karen and their leaders. In our material, we could identify two ways in which the students dealt with this threatening interpretation of Karen as being violent terrorists: (1) by positioning the Karen as the indigenous group of the claimed territory or (2) by claiming higher morals by emphasizing positive in-group stereotypes, such as being peace-loving, kind and honest people. The next excerpt gives an example of the first strategy.

Excerpt 8

I feel proud to be Karen. We came to this land first. It is our land. We Karen have our own nation and territory, but no freedom. That is why the Karen revolution started in 1949. My parents and friends are all revolutionaries. I feel so proud that we are fighting for our freedom in our own land (Say Poe, male, Baptist, Sgaw).

In this excerpt (see also Excerpts 3 and 11), Say Poe defines the Karen as the group that “came to this land first,” and that has its own nation and territory, but no freedom. This interpretation legitimizes the

Karen's struggle and defines the Karen as freedom fighters, rather than as secessionists or terrorists. Because it has been the land of the Karen people since the beginning of history, Say Poe defines their struggle not as an effort to *separate* from a larger political entity, but as an attempt to *get back* the unjustly occupied land. This line of argument is quite similar to that of the thousands of groups classified as or considered to be indigenous or aboriginal peoples, such as the Inuit and the First Peoples in Canada, the aboriginals in Australia, and the Maoris in New Zealand (see Morin and Saladin d'Anglure 1997).

Second, in explaining their feelings of pride to be Karen, almost all students referred to positive in-group stereotypes, such as modesty, peacefulness, kindness, simplicity, and honesty. This narrative of Karen virtues has a long history and places the Karen in a morally superior position (Cheesman 2002). Such positive stereotypes can always be questioned, however, as being subjective, biased, and self-favoring. Therefore, to justify these descriptions and to convince others, it is necessary to make them appear objective and factual. This can be done by presenting the positive traits as being intrinsic to the Karen national character and also by drawing a contrast with the Burmese. The next excerpt is an example of the former approach.

Excerpt 9

I feel so proud of being Karen, because Karen people are those who love honesty, tranquility and peace. When we came to this land, we lived in mountains simply and peacefully. We did not dare to interfere with the lives of the other groups. . . . By nature we are simple, quiet, honest and peace loving (Chris, male, Catholic, Pwo).

Chris explains his pride in being Karen by defining the essence of the Karen character. The virtues are presented as original and timeless, as going back to the earliest days. Honesty, tranquility, peacefulness, and non-interference would define the real or authentic Karen identity—that which is natural and permanent over time. Almost all students, and on many occasions, adopted such a description of the Karen moral character.

The positive national character was not only made plausible historically but also in contrast to the Burmese. Drawing contrasting categorical distinctions is a useful means of making particular descriptions or interpretations a feature of reality, rather than a personal assessment that results from subjective concerns and preoccupations (Dickerson 2000; Horowitz 2000). There are many instances in which the students described the character of the Karen in contrast to that of the Burmese. The next excerpts are two examples:

Excerpt 10

I am proud and happy to be Karen, because we are kind, faithful, sincere, honest, loyal, hospitable and patient. We are the bravest group in Burma, never afraid to fight for what we believe in. In contrast, Burmese are arrogant, always wanting to win over the others. They are cunning, distrustful, and like to manipulate others for their selfish benefits (Dah Kho, male, Baptist, Pwo).

Excerpt 11

Even though we lived in our lands peacefully and simply, the Burmese came to attack us and stole our lands. Since then, we have always been under the oppression by the Burmese people. Even though we are peaceful, we have to fight because they came to attack us first (Chris, male, Catholic, Pwo).

Similarly to Excerpt 9, Dah Kho explains his pride to be Karen in terms of the positive Karen national character. This moral character is made factual by drawing an explicit contrast with the negative traits that typify the Burmese. The importance of these positive self-descriptions for understanding the inter-group situation and the responsibilities involved can be seen in Excerpt 11. Chris draws on the historical image of the peaceful and simple Karen and uses the phrase “even though” twice. This phrase defines the Karen’s involvement in the struggle as being reactive rather than active, and fighting as against their nature. The Karen are not responsible for the conflict but are forced to act and, moreover, act in a way that goes against their inherently peace-loving character. The implication is that the Karen are not violent terrorists but, rather, innocent victims of Burmese aggression. Furthermore, considering their high morality it becomes understandable that Karen autonomy remains a political imperative.

Sincerity and commitment

The Karen nationalists have sustained their struggle for independence and freedom for more than 55 years. There have been several attempts to come to a peace agreement between the Burmese government and the Karen leaders, but without much success. The duration of the struggle raises questions of explanation and interpretation. Particularly, the motives and the character of Karen leaders and fighters can be questioned. One threatening interpretation of the Karen struggle is that the Karen are stubborn people who continue the conflict for instrumental or self-interested reasons. The image of stubbornness was mentioned by the students several times in the focus group discussions and essays. The next two excerpts are examples of this.

Excerpt 12

Moderator: *How do the Burmese people view the Karen?*

Sho Pweh Kho: *They ridicule us in many ways.*

Everybody: *Yes!*

Hsaw Wah: *Not only the classmates, but also the teachers made fun of Karen people. My Burmese teacher told us that all Karen children are insurgents. If the teacher finds some Burmese students behaving stubbornly and disrespectfully, he reprimands them by referring to them as 'Karen insurgents'.*

Excerpt 13

My uncle was one of the Karen who refused to take part in the peace talks with the Burmese government. Then, my Burmese teacher told me that, as long as we Karen stay so stubborn, Burma will never become a peaceful country (Dah Kho, male, Baptist, Pwo).

The interpretations of stubbornness were readily available and can be an obstacle to the political mobilization. In general, people can be expected to be reluctant to associate themselves with activists who are stubborn and destabilize the country for self-interested or instrumental reasons. Hence, to sustain their movement, it is important for the KNU to counter or neutralize these negative public perceptions. In the following two excerpts, the students emphasize that the motive behind the continuation of the conflict is not instrumental at all, but that it springs instead from a genuine commitment and spirit to preserve Karen identity and their territory.

Excerpt 14

I feel proud to be a Karen, because Karen people can sustain our struggle for the freedom despite various difficulties. Even though Karen soldiers have to stay in the jungle for days without food, they have never complained about it. Even though Karen people stay poor and under severe oppression by the Burmese people, we can confront it. That is why I thank God so much for choosing me to be a member of the Karen race (Shoe Pwe Kho, male, Baptist, Sgaw).

Excerpt 15

I am proud of being Karen, because we have not given up our struggle for our freedom. Even though we have been oppressed by the Burmese government for a long time, have suffered from starvation, and been ignored by the outside world, our leaders have never lost their enthusiasm and spirit to protect our nation, territory, and culture (David, male, Catholic, Sgaw).

In both excerpts the feeling of pride is related to the continuation of the struggle and the endurance of hardship. The reference to pride is

interesting because it suggests that the conduct is admirable and the cause worthwhile. People feel proud about something that is noteworthy and valuable.

The image presented in these excerpts is not one of instrumental reasons or of people trying to maximize their subjective expected utility. Rather, there is an image of inspired and dedicated leaders and fighters who are willing to endure all kinds of hardships. The Karen continue the fight “even though” doing so means suffering, poverty, and starvation. It is only for the maintenance of their group and the fight for freedom that Karen nationalists have endured. The mentioning of the hardships makes the motive sincere and the objectives group-based.

The students also gave concrete examples of family members (previously) involved in the KNU and of Karen leaders who have continued the fight over the years. These people were presented as examples and national icons that symbolize the Karen nature. Their actions become the exemplary forms of behavior and their character becomes the national character (Reicher and Hopkins 2001). Who we are and how we should be and act are defined by the way these exemplary people are defined. Some students explicitly said that the revolutionary leaders or revolutionaries in their family or village were role models who guided and encouraged them to work or sacrifice their personal lives for the Karen community. They also indicated that they felt a responsibility to both former and future generations to maintain and protect Karen identity. This reference to an intergenerational commitment and loyalty has a history within the KNU (“Father-to-Son” war, Harridan 2002) and further directs attention away from interpretations that suggest or see self-interest as the prime motivation behind the Karen’s struggle.

The sincerity and commitment of the Karen nationalists as well as of one’s own involvement can also be made plausible in contrast to uncommitted Karen people. The students not only narrated their pride in being Karen but also talked about feelings of shame. These feelings were described in relation to co-ethnic “deserters.” The next excerpt is an example.

Excerpt 16

I feel very ashamed of some Karen people who have deserted to the Burmese government. They split from our group and organized their own group. Then, they made a cease-fire agreement with the Burmese government, and started to attack us, even though they are Karen! These Karens only think of their individual benefits to make money and do not commit themselves to our nation (Sho Pwe Kho, male, Baptist, Sgaw).

Here a contrast between two groups of Karen is made. One group consists of deserters that lack commitment to the Karen cause and collaborate with the Burmese. Their motives for doing so are criticized by defining them as purely self-interested. By implication, the other group is committed and dedicated to the national cause for other than instrumental reasons. With the reference to shame, Sho Pwe Kho positions herself firmly in this latter group.

Discussion

The development and maintenance of “groupness” and a sense of collective “we” are key tasks for any ethno-political organization. There are almost always intra-group differences, and most ethnic movements try to mobilize various sub-groups. Sometimes the internal diversity is substantial, as with the Karen, making the task of establishing a sense of peoplehood and unity a difficult one. In addition, there are always alternative narratives and interpretations made by “outsiders” that challenge and potentially undermine the group-making process. This study was conducted in an informal school established by the KNU to educate the future leaders for this ethno-political movement. By analyzing open-ended essays, interviews, and focus group discussions, we examined the narratives of thirty young Karen students belonging to various cultural sub-groups and religions and coming from different geographical locations. The focus of the analysis was on the ways that the students narrated what it means to be Karen and how these meanings accounted for their expressed feelings of pride.

The first part of the analysis explored the ways in which the students positioned the Karen as a distinctive ethno-national group. In their narratives, the students emphasized the Karen’s unique migratory history from Mongolia, their recognizable cultural artifacts, and their own national symbols and political instruments. These interpretations firmly establish the Karen’s “distinctiveness” as an ethno-national group, which is important for several reasons. One is that it challenges the idea of an ethnically homogeneous Burma and the suppression and denial of minority group rights. Moreover, these narratives justify the claim to political autonomy by aligning it to the universal discourse of national self-determination. In addition, these narratives are also important for intra-group differences because the emphasis is on group similarity, unity, and cohesion. Stories about a common origin confirm the assumed genealogical tie of the heterogeneous Karen community. This imagined blood tie also implies a normative aspect, making the students feel obligated to love each other as members of the same family and to act in the name of their group.

The second part of the analysis showed the ways in which the students dealt with the negative perception of Karen insurgents as “secessionists” and “violent terrorists,” who perpetuate the conflict only because of their stubbornness and for instrumental reasons. These kinds of negative labeling question the legitimacy of the goals and acts of an ethno-political movement and can easily hamper mobilization processes because people can be reluctant to identify with a stigmatized social movement or group (Vermeersch 2003). Hence, it is crucial for the students who are already engaged in the struggle to produce alternative understandings of the Karen insurgency. They did this in three ways. First, their emphasis on the Karen’s indigeness positioned the KNU as “freedom fighters” rather than terrorists: The Karen revolution is about getting back what was historically theirs. Second, and in contrast to the claimed dishonesty and aggressiveness of the Burmese, the Karen were presented as inherently simple, honest, tranquil, and peace-loving people. The Karen would be forced to act and in a manner that goes against their moral nature. Third, the story of great endurance by their leaders created an image of committed people fighting for a legitimate goal. Narratives about hardships such as poverty, starvation, and oppression by the Burmese military go against an interpretation of the Karen as stubborn people who mainly fight for instrumental reasons. The hardships and the duration of the conflicts become signs of the Karen’s sincerity and commitment to the group and its cause.

Establishing a pan-Karen identity is a continuous struggle for the KNU, not only in relation to the Burmese and the Burmese government but also because of the internal diversity. Related to the latter, it is interesting to note what was not used in defining Karen identity. Religion and language are important and obvious markers of “ethnicity” (Brown 2001), but these issues were downplayed or ignored in the narratives of the students. The modern sense of Karen identity has been dominated and characterized by Christian Baptists (Marshall 1922; San C. Po 1928; Smeaton 1887), and although many students were ardent Christians, going to church every Sunday and organizing a nightly worship, there were no references to Christianity in relation to Karen identity. This lack of references to religion may reflect a particular feature of contemporary KNU politics. Considering the history of the Karen struggle and the dividing influence of religion, KNU officials have been very concerned with minimizing the functional use of religious differences. During our fieldwork, for instance, the history teacher explicitly and repeatedly warned the students not to judge others on the basis of their religious backgrounds. Hence, these conditions may explain the lack of explicit references to religion in the students’ narratives.

We conducted our study in a particular school, and the analysis does not address the lived reality of the Karen community or the situation within Burma. However, it should be noted that such schools are powerful ideological institutions that educate future leaders. In addition, our interest was in examining the group-definitions of an ethno-political organization. Furthermore, the narratives discussed have a wider currency, reflect or resonate with the “official” Karen ideology, and some have a long history (Cheesman 2002).

A sense of groupness is never finished, and the Karen’s attempts at unification and justification can be challenged or supported by both global and more local developments. For example, increased global tensions and divergences as well as international relations and organizations can play a role in the policies regarding ethnic minorities adopted by the government of Burma. Internationally, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the claims of so-called indigenous groups because these relate to the dominant political and moral ideas about cultural and group rights. These groups argue that they are “a people” rather than a population. The United Nations’ draft declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples is premised on a rather reified and primordial notion of groups and cultures (Hodgson 2002). Narrative opportunities and constraints are not fixed, particularly not for those identities that are currently among the most contested, such as ethnicity, religion, and nation. New developments can create new commonalities and discrepancies. This is also true for minority groups that try to incorporate various subgroups and present themselves as “a people” that has legitimate claims, such as the Karen.

Notes

Received 30 January 2006; accepted 28 February 2007.

We thank the staff and all the students of the KYLMTC for their support and participation in this research.

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